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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: PARTY ENACTS "SAFE" POLITICAL REFORM BY
RESTRUCTURING LOCAL PARTY COMMITTEES

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[1](#)B. BEIJING 2711

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson. Reasons 1.
4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The Chinese media has trumpeted nationwide, local-level reorganization of Communist Party committees over the past year as an example of political reform designed to increase efficiency and "inner-Party deocracy." The most visible change has been reduction of the number of local Deputy Party Secretary positions to two, with one overseeing Party affairs, the other supervising Government matters. Despite the laudatory press coverage, reaction to the changes has been decidedly mixed. One scholar told us the restructuring amounted to mere "administrative tinkering" and did not rise to the level of "political reform," as it was only a natural correction to the proliferation of Deputy Party Secretary positions in the 1990s. Another scholar related complaints from local officials who are confused about how to divide up work under the new structure. One contact critically observed that, despite the emphasis on "inner-Party democracy," the upshot of recent changes in the provinces has been to increase the power of the Party Secretary, making local-level politics even less democratic

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than before. End summary.

Reducing Deputy Party Secretary Slots as "Reform"

[1](#)2. (SBU) Reorganization of Communist Party committees at the local level, represented most visibly by reduction of the number of local Deputy Party Secretaries to two, has been hailed over the past year by official Chinese media as an example of political reform designed to increase the efficiency of Party organs and "inner-Party democracy." The idea surfaced publicly at the September 2004 Fourth Plenum of the Communist Party Central Committee, which issued a vague call for reducing the number of Deputy Secretaries in local Party committees. In 2006, a more focused announcement regarding implementation of a "one chief, two deputies" system was issued, with implementation starting in fall 2006 as the first in a staggered wave of nationwide local Party Congresses was held.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The reorganization has been carried out in conjunction with the recently completed nationwide "change of term" (huanjie) personnel turnover that has taken place in Party apparatuses over the past year at four levels: province, city, county and township. According to a Xinhua News Agency report dated August 9, 2007, personnel turnover

was successfully completed in 31 provinces, 408 cities, 2,763 counties and 34,976 townships. Among them, the "vast majority" of areas reduced their Deputy Party Secretary slots to two, including 90 percent of provinces (i.e., all but three), 79.4 percent of cities and 84.4 percent of counties. This change resulted in an overall reduction of Deputy Party Secretary slots by 91 at the provincial level; 806 at the

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city level; 5,165 at the county level and 41,476 at the township level. Reasons for those Party apparatuses that did not carry out the reductions reportedly varied, but at the provincial level, the reasons cited were the need to include ethnic group representatives in Inner Mongolia and Tibet, and in Xinjiang, the desire to include a representative from the massive Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps. The Party-sponsored People's Forum magazine in January of this year hailed the reorganization as a "bright spot" in China's political reform and an "acceleration" of changes to the leadership system.

Why the Change? "Efficiency" and "Democracy"

14. (SBU) According to official media, the goals of the changes are to increase the efficiency of Party organizations at the local level and to promote greater "inner-party democracy." In terms of efficiency, Liaowang Magazine, a Xinhua News Agency publication, earlier in 2007 (Ref A) reported that the reduction in the number of Deputy Party Secretary slots has decreased duplication and overlap of

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portfolios among local Party leaders, clarified responsibilities and pushed greater responsibility to lower levels. For example, under the old system, the Standing Committee of a Party Provincial Committee, which is the supreme political organ at the provincial level, had as many as 15 members, led by a Party Secretary and from three to eight Deputy Party Secretaries. Deputy Party Secretaries were given nominal responsibility for departments under the

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Standing Committee, including the Party Organization, Propaganda, United Front Work and Political Science and Law Departments, as well as the Provincial Commission for Discipline Inspection. But each of these departments also had a department head, some of whom concurrently were also Deputy Party Secretaries, some of whom were not. Further adding to the complexity of the previous structure was the fact that other members of the Party Standing Committee who were not Deputy Party Secretaries sometimes also had partial responsibility for issues that overlapped with these departments.

15. (SBU) Under the new system, these problems have supposedly been resolved, with only one Standing Committee Member designated as the Deputy Party Secretary in charge of all Party affairs, while the other Deputy is in charge of all government affairs (at the provincial level, for example, the other Deputy would concurrently hold the position of Governor or its equivalent). There has reportedly also been a clearer delineation of responsibilities, with each local Standing Committee member given specific responsibilities for a portfolio and corresponding department under the local Party committee. Additional efficiency has supposedly been gained by giving Department heads greater responsibility and freedom of maneuver, as well as greater access to the Party Secretary. Some commentators have even claimed the

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restructuring will result in cost savings, because in addition to slashing the number of Deputy Party Secretaries, the total number of Standing Committee members in most provinces has been reduced to 11. In fact, Xinhua has reported that the number of officials in the "leadership

group" (lingdao banzi) has decreased by 21 persons at the provincial level, 149 at the city level, 859 at the county level and 34,368 persons in townships.

16. (SBU) Promoting "inner-Party democracy" and expanding "collective" decision making has been another stated goal of the changes. As reported in Liaowang and other official media, by eliminating several Deputy Party Secretary positions, central officials hoped to force local Party Secretaries to deal directly with local Standing Committees

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as a whole, rather than consulting only with a small clique of Deputy Party Secretaries in "Secretaries' work meetings," as had become the unofficial norm in most of the country. By forcing more contact between the Party Secretary and local Standing Committees, the policymaking process is supposed to be more "democratic" and "collective," as is policy implementation, which now is more fully the responsibility of the entire Standing Committee.

Reaction Mixed: "Tinkering" Viewed as "Safe" Reform

17. (C) Reaction to the reorganization among Embassy contacts has been decidedly mixed and mostly negative. According to Dong Lisheng (protect), long-time Embassy contact and scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), reducing the number of local Deputy Party Secretaries amounts to "administrative tinkering," not "real" political reform. Dong recently asserted to Poloff that the reduction is a natural correction to the proliferation of the number of Deputy Party Secretary slots in the 1990s. That expansion was partially a reaction against the political reforms pushed by Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang in the 1980s, as well as the reforms adopted at the 13th Party Congress in 1987. Those reforms included abolishing Party organizations in the ministries and generally attempting to separate the functions of the Party and the state. (Note: According to Dong, it was Hu Yaobang who first proposed reducing the number of local Deputy Party Secretary slots.) After Hu's fall from grace in 1987, followed by his successor Zhao Ziyang's ouster in 1989, a series of post-Tiananmen steps were taken to strengthen the Party's position throughout the 1990s, including increasing the number of Deputy Party Secretary positions. Another objective was to increase career opportunities for cadres in charge of propaganda, youth league and other issues by creating Deputy slots for them. The result was a "cumbersome" local Party structure. Now the pendulum has swung back the other way, and the Party is trying to correct the unforeseen consequences of earlier changes, Dong said.

18. (C) Central Party School (CPS) scholar Li Xiaoke (protect) was largely dismissive of the reorganization, calling it a kind of "safe" political "reform" that the center can promote while avoiding doing anything that might threaten Party supremacy. According to Li, the reorganization was originally carried out as an "experiment" somewhere in China, later catching the eye of top leaders, which resulted in its being ordered as the model to follow nationwide. Li therefore cautioned against buying into central propaganda by

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placing too much emphasis on the importance of these changes.

Confusion Reigns Locally

19. (C) Professor Kang Shaobang (protect), also of the Central Party School, separately related to Poloff the criticisms of the restructuring that he had heard from local officials, some of whom are his students at the CPS. According to Kang, many local officials grouse that the changes have merely resulted in confusion over precisely who is supposed to be in charge of issues. For example, the one Deputy in charge of

Party affairs cannot possibly oversee all the work previously done by several Deputies, but there has been no clear guidance on exactly what the one Deputy should do. There is also reportedly skepticism that department heads will be able to carry out their newly expanded responsibilities, many of which used to be handled by more senior cadres. An August 2007 article in the reformist Southern Weekend (Nanfang Zhoumo) newspaper contained similar commentary, criticizing the "inefficiency" of the restructuring because the remaining Deputy Party Secretaries now have such large areas of responsibility that they "cannot really manage anything at all."

Less Democracy, not More

¶10. (C) Many observers have been critical of the restructuring's failure to increase the "democratic" nature of policymaking at the local level, which has instead resulted in the further concentration of power in the Party Secretary's hands. CPS Professor Kang, however, thought the

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changes had succeeded mildly in this regard, arguing that the reduction in the number of Deputy Party Secretary slots had corresponded with increased involvement by more people on the local Standing Committees, which might even serve as a model for changes at the center at this fall's Party Congress (Ref B). Nevertheless, most contacts have been critical of the move's "undemocratic" tendencies. CPS Scholar Li Xiaoke said the changes have increased the power of Party Secretaries by expanding the divide between the top leadership and Standing Committee members. Not only has this made policymaking less rather than more collective, but it also dooms the restructuring to failure, as the large gap between the Party Secretary and those carrying out the policies makes it

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impossible to sufficiently monitor and guide the work being done, Li asserted.

¶11. (C) A May 2007 article in the provocative Southern Window magazine, which is managed by the Guangzhou Party Committee, also argued that the changes have nothing to do with "inner-Party democracy" but rather seek to strengthen the Party Secretary's power, particularly over budget decisions. The report claims that the Deputy Party Secretaries previously had too much control over the budget, but now Party Secretaries under the new system can exert more influence over department budgeting by dealing directly with Standing Committee members. Professor Jin Canrong (protect) of Renmin University similarly told Poloff that such administrative reform at the local level is merely an attempt to enhance "good governance," which does not necessarily have anything to do with "democracy." Summing up the changes, CPS's Li Xiaoke said the reduction in number of Deputy Party Secretaries, coupled with other changes such as making most

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provincial Party Secretaries concurrently serve as Chairmen of the provincial People's Congresses, has resulted not only in more power in the hands of Party Secretaries but also a local policymaking process that is even less democratic than before.

Impact on Anti-Corruption Fight?

¶12. (C) Chinese media have also debated whether reducing the number of Deputy Party Secretaries has weakened the functions of the local Discipline and Inspection Commissions, precisely at a time when the center is trying to crack down on corruption. "Demoting" the head of local Discipline and Inspection Commissions, who in many cases had been a Deputy Party Secretary, has resulted in an overall weakening of the Commissions' oversight powers, some have argued. The Liaowang article mentioned above (Ref A) carries commentary from both sides of the debate. An April 2007 article in the

Central Party School's Study Times newspaper, however, argues that despite the demotion in rank of some local Commission heads, their influence has actually increased, because the Central Government now holds the power of nominating and appointing provincial Commission secretaries. The CPS's Li Xiaoke told Poloff he thought the local restructuring would have little effect on the Commissions' anti-corruption work,

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which in general is likely to fail, but for reasons unrelated to the current restructuring of local Party Committees.

Comment

¶13. (C) As speculation about political reform continues in the run up to this fall's 17th Party Congress, propaganda organs have not been shy about touting administrative changes such as the reduction in the number of Deputy Party Secretaries as successful "reform" that has already been

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implemented. While it is perhaps in part an attempt to correct governance problems at the local level, the restructuring also clearly provides the center with a convenient, and safe, way to promote "reform" and "democracy" without in any way undermining the Party's authority. At the same time, the move has only further contributed to the skepticism among many contacts regarding the prospects for any "real" political reform this fall.
Piccuta